

Rebecka Bence

## Chasing Nothing

August

The red needle hovered past the tick mark on my white bathroom scale. My insides burned as I stood on the scale to recheck. Just one month back in school, and I was up eight pounds? I squeezed my eyes shut, and avoided looking at my naked body in the mirror, as I stepped into the shower. The smell of my VeryBerry shampoo filled the pale yellow bathroom, the blue bottle matching the cracked teal tiles, as I thought about the dress my mom had just bought me two days before. She had taken me to the Galleria Mall in St. Louis, somewhere we only went on very special occasions; and although she would never say so, I knew that she thought if she bought me an extra special dress, I might feel beautiful for once. Before high school I never really thought about my body in that way, but after being made fun of for my fat knees and round face freshman year, I couldn't even look in the mirror for more than a few seconds.

I stepped on the scale three more times after my shower before hurrying down to answer my mother's frustrated calls for dinner.

"Took you long enough! The spaghetti has been ready for fifteen minutes, honey." I didn't try to make excuses—I was too busy thinking about my weight gain.

"Look Kels," my dad's stern voice ended the painful silence hovering over our dinner table, "Your mother and I can tell you are upset about your weight; it's not hard to see. You've been standing on that scale more than the actual ground lately. If you are truly that worried about the dance, just eat really light this week. It's really not that hard." I had just finished

swallowing the small tangle of noodles I had put on my plate. I could feel it now, sitting in a clod of guilt in my gut. I nodded slowly, without saying a word. If Dad, who steered clear of anything girly and dramatic, felt that he needed to say something, I really must look like I had gained weight. That night, I decided.

### September

One cup of unsweetened cornflakes: 155 calories. One green salad with one tablespoon of light raspberry vinaigrette (throw away the almonds): 75 calories. One cup of frozen blueberries: 60 calories. Two cups of steamed vegetables, no butter: 100 calories. Sometimes one baked chicken breast, only lightly seasoned: 120 calories. Total: 510 calories.

Every day, this is what I ate. Nothing more, sometimes less. Nothing crossed my lips unless it was absolutely necessary. Anything I did eat was low calorie, sugar free, and nonfat.

As the month passed, the hunger pains grew worse. It felt like my stomach was trying to eat itself, desperate to stop the needles that pierced me with every breath. I found that by chewing gum I could distract my body from the truth. I would cycle through cinnamon, orange, watermelon, bubblegum, spearmint, Cobalt—anything to trick my mind into thinking I was actually eating something. Sometimes I was so hungry while lying in bed I would fall asleep with gum in my mouth as it was the only way to distract myself from the pain. However, by around midmonth, I could actually feel the weight falling off. Each day I was a little bit lighter, a little bit thinner. I read endless “Thinspo” articles and stared at pictures of the perfect models in my Glamour magazine. I would constantly take my hands and place them on my hips to feel where my love handles used to be, to feel where I had whittled the fat away. The only thing I wanted to feel was bone.

## October

Finally, the pain stopped. Or maybe it hadn't stopped, but had become such a normal sensation that I didn't feel it anymore. (Like diabetics learn to be less sensitive to pricking their fingers, I had learned to be less sensitive to hunger pains). In addition, October brought me the discovery that now, with a limited caloric intake, my senses of sight and smell seemed to be enhanced. I could not remember another fall where the oranges, yellows, and reds were more vibrant. I smiled at the funny scarecrows on people's front porches, smelled the sweet honey aroma of the candy corn dish my mother put out (off limits to my restricted diet), and absolutely fell in love with the warm cozy sweaters I could now wear. Before, sweaters always looked chunky and awkward on me, giving me a shape of something close to a lumpy pumpkin. Now, my old sweaters were rejuvenated, as they hung off my shoulders, displaying my newly emerged collar bones.

On Halloween, I passed out all kinds of candy to the kids in my neighborhood while wearing a bright orange t-shirt that had been too small for me for three years. I laughed and complimented their costumes as I filled their sacks with as much candy as I could. Weirdly, I found an enormous sense of happiness in giving others sweets. I suppose I knew the more candy I gave away, the less there would be to tempt me.

Nothing could break me now.

## November

October passed quickly, and the golden rays of afternoon sunlight began to turn dark and cold. Rain constantly accompanied me to the bus stop, similar to the daily headaches I was now prone to experience. I went to the doctor, but the only answer anyone could offer was more

water and more sleep. Sleep was difficult as I would lie in bed exhausted, but as soon as I closed my eyes, the voices would start like a crowd of people gathered in my head, talking complete gibberish. The incessant noise, the headaches, and my limited diet often made the most difficult part of the day walking up the stairs to bed.

## December

The day my high school let out for winter break, my sister surprised me by coming home from college early and picking me up from school. I found her waiting by the bus line, her short stature blending in with the mob of kids.

“Hey sistaaaa!” She greeted me with a warm hug, her wine red lips and sleek brown hair done perfectly as usual. I squealed and threw my arms around her. It was so great to see her, and even more satisfying to see that I was now slimmer than her. We made our way to her car, chatting and laughing about all the latest drama and gossip. Instead of heading straight down the highway home, though, Hannah pulled into the Subway parking lot and said, “I’m starving and I know you love Subway, so my treat?” I knew she really wanted to make me happy while she was home, as we’d had a pretty big fight over Thanksgiving Break, so I smiled and said “Heck yeah!”

Walking up to the counter, I began to order my usual. A chopped turkey salad with veggies and vinegar for dressing. 110 calories, 2 grams of fat. Hannah put a hand on my arm, her eyes narrowed. “Kels, it’s freezing outside and you are the thinnest I have ever seen you. Will you please order a sandwich, not a skimpy salad?” The guy behind the counter seemed embarrassed for me, and I could feel my cheeks running hot despite the shivers that continually wracked my body.

“Hannah, I want a salad, please just let me order what I want.” My teeth were clenched. She just didn’t like that I was skinner than her.

“Kelsey, I talked with mom and she specifically told me that I was not allowed to let you order a salad. So order a sandwich.” Her hazel eyes turned to daggers. Reluctantly, I ordered a turkey on wheat. 280 calories, 3.5 grams of fat. We didn’t speak for the rest of the car ride, but at least we were not fighting. Once home, I set my sandwich on the kitchen counter and said, “I really have to go to the bathroom. You should totally just eat without me.” Hannah didn’t even blink.

“Take your time, I’ll wait for you.” I cursed internally, pretended to use the restroom, and then joined her at the table with my sandwich. I unwrapped it slowly, hating the feeling of the soft bread in my hands. Looking at it made me sick to my stomach at the thought of actually eating all those carbs. Hannah bit off the end of her sandwich and chewed, her eyes never left me. I stared at the food a bit longer, got up for a glass of water, and pulled at the shredded lettuce that was peeking out from underneath the bread. Finally, not caring if I started World War Z, I took off the top layer of bread and rolled up the turkey to eat it by itself.

“Seriously?!” Hannah’s high pitched shriek was enough to draw Mom out of the living room where she had been touching up the tree.

“What’s going on here?” Mom said, as she appeared in the kitchen doorway. Her gaze shifted from Hannah, who was now standing, fuming, with her arms crossed, glaring; and me, still seated with the rolled up turkey in my hand.

“She can’t even eat a sandwich, Mom! A SANDWICH!”

I cringed visibly. Her yelling had set me on edge more than I already was. Lately any loud noise, from the slamming of a car door to someone yelling down the school hallway, made

me instantly panic, and I often had to fight back tears. Now, caught between the glare of my sister and the impossibly hurt look of my mother, the tears flowed freely.

“All I wanted was a salad okay? I just can’t eat this. It makes me sick to my stomach. Why do I have to eat something that makes me sick? At least I’m eating something! Isn’t that good enough? I’m sorry... I really... I just...I can’t okay? You just don’t get it.” I shoved back the kitchen chair and bolted for my room. I sobbed until I was empty, and then continued to hyperventilate and dry heave. Mom held me tight, whispering that everything would be alright. It would all be alright. Breathe. Just breathe...

### January

At my door there was gentle knock. “Come in,” I said absently as I tried to focus on my homework, one hand pressing a hot pad on my cramping stomach. It helped dull the pain while keeping my freezing body semi warm. Mom entered my room, closing the space between us swiftly, and dumped various food items on my bed. Fresh fruits, Naked smoothies, protein shakes, Cliff bars, and a bag of jelly beans. I knew she was speaking to me. I heard her say the words, “Try to eat,” and “these are healthy,” and “small splurges are good for you,” but I could not comprehend. My mind was too far gone, retreated inside itself to the space I went when I was tempted to eat. I nodded my head and smiled, promising to try harder. Even though I was looking back down at my homework, I could still feel her eyes boring into me.

She kept staring at me until I finally looked up and met her gaze.

“Kels, honey. I was doing some research, and I’ve talked with Dr. Ortman...” I did not like where this was going.

“Okay..? Mom, I really have to finish this homework....”

“No, just hear me out. Kelsey, I think it’s time we both faced the fact that you are struggling with a serious problem here. You barely eat anything—”

“I eat though mom!”

“Wait, just listen, okay? You barely eat; you are irritable all the time, and your once frequent smile shows only once in a blue moon now. You are obsessed with giving other people sweets...Kelsey. I think you are depressed. And furthermore, you are using anorexia as a way to try cope with that depression.” Now I was truly silent. My mom’s deep blue eyes reflected mine as she let what she had said sink in. Unhealthily losing weight? Maybe. But anorexia? No. I ate! Maybe small amounts but I still ate. Besides, when I looked in the mirror, I still saw fat. Anorexic people were nothing but skin and bone.

Feeling unfairly diagnosed, I said, “Look Mom, yes, maybe I am a little depressed. I’ve been that way for a while though. School is just hard. I’ll pull out of it, eventually. But anorexic? That’s a bit extreme. I will try harder to eat a little more, if you just stop worrying about me. I am finally getting to a point where I am happy with the way I look. I promise, I am just fine.” She raised her thin eyebrows at me.

“Happy with the way you look? Really? So yesterday when you broke down crying saying, ‘I am so fat,’ that was you being, happy with yourself?” The saturation of sarcasm in that sentence was almost more than I could handle.

“I said ‘getting to a point,’ didn’t I? I know I was being irrational yesterday, and I apologized for that. Seriously Mom, can we let this go?” Seeing that she was defeated, my mother stood slowly,

“Okay, I will let it go for now. You have to agree to something though. If you drop below 100 pounds, I am forbidding you to see your boyfriend, is that clear?” My eyes narrowed. Would she really do that? I called her bluff.

“Sure Mom, you got it.”

### February

I looked in the mirror and counted each rib. I then inspected my chest. When I hunched my shoulders and drew my chest inward, a deep line cut vertically from my throat down between my size A breasts. Above my chest, my collar bones looked like one long shelf, extending to each shoulder and creating a right angle to my arm. I twisted to look at my shoulder blades, sharp points rising above the plane of my back. I looked down at my legs, putting my feet together so they touched. My thigh gap was decent. I took both hands and wrapped them around my upper quad—my fingers touched. Looking back to the mirror, my face no longer housed baby fat. Instead, sunken cheeks made my eyes and my mouth look bigger. Finally, I turned sideways and sucked my stomach in as far as it would go. From this angle, my body looked like a half moon, starting at my breasts, scooped out in the stomach, and widened again at my hip bones. Still though, I pinched at excess skin on my arms and legs. Not done yet.

### March

Shivering, naked, the bathroom scale was set down in front of me. Mom had threatened some time ago that if I dropped below 100 hundred pounds, she would ban me from seeing my boyfriend. I had agreed, knowing there was no way she would do that. He was the only thing that could get me to smile these days. I stepped on the scale, and my little red needle did so well. It stopped starkly at 91 pounds. I felt the high of losing weight surge through my body. Mom stood back, told me to get dressed, and left the bathroom. She was waiting outside the door

when I finished, eyes red and swollen. I watched blankly as the tears started streaming down her face, her body shaking with sobs. She didn't understand. I was better this way.

I saw my boyfriend that night.

## April

Every girl deserves her fairytale at some point right; the night she feels like the most gorgeous girl in the room and dances the night away with Prince Charming? For many, high school prom offers to turn that dream into a reality, and it was finally my turn.

My dress was a ball gown style, with an empire cut drop waist, sweet heart neck line, and lace up back. It was the perfect shade of deep pink, like a rose that was not quite red. Down the front of the dress, intricate glass beading gave way to a scalloped and swooped bottom. A tailor was even able to take in the size 00 dress to fit my impossibly narrow frame. I finished the look with a pair of crystal high heels and a three hour hair appointment that left me with a beautiful half up-do: soft princess curls falling down the back of my neck starred with rhinestone jewels.

I looked in my full length mirror one last time before I headed downstairs to join Kyle. Even though the dress had been tailored just two weeks before, it was already a little loose under the arms and through the back. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten anything other than plain vegetables and salad, but I had begged and pleaded with Mom not to take me to some sort of weird rehab center until after this day. This day was my chance to show everyone that I was not a just a girl with a round face and fat knees; it was my day to love the pictures taken before the dance, it was my day to dance in the middle of the dance floor because I was beautiful enough.

Kyle drove his dad's black Hummer, and he happily chattered while I listened on our way to the expo center. The walk through the crowded parking lot seemed to last for miles, and I tried very hard to keep a pace that matched Kyle's long and eager strides. By the time we reached the crowd, I was breathing heavily, but Kyle was too caught up in seeing his buddies to notice. I disengaged his hand to go lean against a wall, just briefly, as he made his rounds. I could see the twinkle lights and hear the music coming from the main ballroom. I smiled. This was it! As I pushed myself off the wall, suddenly, the world slid sideways. I couldn't catch my balance, and I saw the ground rush up to meet me.

## May

I almost died the night of my very first high school prom. By whittling my body down to a mere 79.3 pounds, I had weakened everything in my system. The doctors told me I was anemic, my white blood cell count was dangerously low, I had lost bone mass, and my heart was so small and weak it was a miracle it did not give out on me sooner. I flat-lined while in the ambulance, but two determined EMT's revived me on the fourth attempt. After they stabilized me, I spent about six weeks in a rehabilitation center with other patients who had eating disorders. Some were young and new like me, others called themselves repeat offenders because this was their third or fourth or sixth time back in to the clinic. We ranged from 12 year old girls to grown men to pregnant women. There is no one size fits all like most self-help articles seem to portray. Oh, and another thing? No one tells you that once you start to beat anorexia, binge eating silently takes its place. After months of not eating food such as bread, milk, peanut butter, or chocolate, once I had a little taste again I lost all self control. This brought new struggles of

bulimia and rapid weight gain. I couldn't decide what was worse—being stared at for having the body of a prepubescent boy or because your clothes are shrinking at an impossibly fast rate.

### Sometime Later

I step on my new electronic scale. No more little red needle. The numbers flash and then hold at 135.5 pounds. I have come to accept this. I have realized that my personal value does not rely on other people's perception of me or, heaven forbid, on a little red needle. I do not need to look like the girls in Glamour or Vogue. That will not bring me happiness. My family and my friends love me for my soul. Not for something they can see or touch or take a picture of. Each person is defined by their actions. I will never waste mine on something so insignificant again. I will love myself and the world. I will shower anyone and everyone in love in the hopes that they will never experience the pain I did. I will listen, I will comfort, and I will live. I will be truly happy. I will eat.